

Operation Pipeline Training Targets Drugs

A speeding Cadillac and a CHP officer who once worked as a mechanic were the keys to the largest highway heroin seizure in California history during 1998.

While the CHP has made larger seizures of cocaine and marijuana, the \$3.5 million heroin drug bust illustrates the value of basic patrol techniques and the CHP's Operation Pipeline training in controlling the flow of drugs on California's highways.

Officer Brad Romero was patrolling on I-5 in Sacramento County when he spotted a white 1987 Cadillac traveling at excessive speed. He radioed his partner, Officer Mike Thomason. Rain and traffic were heavy, and it wasn't until the Cadillac reached metropolitan Sacramento that the two South Sacramento Area officers stopped it.

The driver didn't have a license. He told Thomason he was going to San Jose. Romero talked to the passenger, who said they were headed for Weed, California.

The two officers obtained the driver's consent to search the car and found a freshly used can of undercoating in the trunk.

"Our heads went under the car together," said Thomason, a former Cadillac mechanic. He noted the transmission tunnel was filled in, a departure from the standard Cadillac configuration. They called K-9 Officer Jerry Smith and his dog, Rocky, who alerted on the car as one containing drugs.

When the officers cut into the compartment from under the car, they found six packages of pure black tar heroin worth \$3.5 million. "It was stuffed down there like sausages, 14.4 pounds of it," said Romero.

Their bust was the single largest heroin interdiction on California highways and the second largest in the US, confirmed by the federal Drug Enforcement Administration's El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC).

Thomason and Romero are two of a growing group of CHP's patrol officers, who received Operation Pipeline training, which gives them added skills in identifying drug trafficking.

While the traditional public perception of the CHP officer is as a traffic enforcer, the Department also has an important role in drug interdiction. "We have an ethical and moral responsibility as Highway Patrol officers to stop it," said Sergeant Tom Carmichael, head of the CHP's interdiction program in its Inland Division.

To be effective at stopping drugs, officers needed training. "Narcotics enforcement is secondary to our traffic enforcement mission," said Captain Larry Bamrick, commander of the CHP Investigative Services Section. "Before we started Operation Pipeline training in 1987, they had no idea what drug trafficking indicators to look for."

Couriers who ferried elaborately concealed drugs along California's major freeways were becoming more ruthless, more dangerous and more frequently armed, said Bamrick.

"It was an officer safety issue," he said.

Today's couriers use cell phones, pagers and underground information networks and complex concealment schemes. The latest dodges to hide drugs include packing them in PVC pipe or metal containers and then submerging them in the vehicle's gas tank to thwart the noses of drug-sniffing dogs.

What the Department has learned from Operation Pipeline training is that an enthusiastic traffic officer with training who vigorously works the road for speeders, drunk drivers, car thieves, safety belt violators and unregistered vehicles is also the most likely to catch drug couriers.

The Department is revising the training, standardizing it statewide, adding intermediate and advanced courses for interested officers and offering supervisory and management training to support the Operation Pipeline-trained officers.

Romero and Thomason aren't the only highly successful officers using their Operation Pipeline training. A sample of other huge seizures in 1998 include:

- April 25: Officer Al Stallman stopped a Honda Civic in Shasta County for exceeding the speed limit. Thirteen pounds of heroin were in the car.
- March 17: Officer Joey Nardil stopped a Jeep Cherokee in Alameda County for failing to use a turn signal. The stop yielded 207 pounds of cocaine.
- May 5: Officer Larry Chambers pulled over a Chevrolet pickup in Merced County for having tinted front passenger side windows. He seized 209 pounds of marijuana.

- September 4: Officers Guillermo Mendez and Michael Clauser pursued a Buick LeSabre in San Diego County for running a Border Patrol checkpoint. When the pursuit terminated, they found 2,147 pounds of marijuana.

- September 25: Officers Philip Ross and John Erb stopped a vehicle in Monterey County for having tinted side windows. The incident resulted in seizure of 17 pounds of methamphetamine.

- July 24: Officers Joe David and Del Gray pulled over a truck trailer straddling traffic lanes. The vehicle contained 720 pounds of marijuana.

Operation Pipeline-trained officers have traveled throughout the country training other state patrol officers in highway drug interdiction.

California's freeways, including Interstates 5, 10 and 15 and Highways 99 and 40 are the major thoroughfares for drugs. Carmichael estimates officers on patrol in Inland Division make a drug bust a day.

"There's no way of knowing in advance whether someone you stop will be transporting drugs," said Carmichael. "Officers may get a load of



drugs the first stop of the day. Or it may be the 17th stop of the day. You have to be making good traffic enforcement contacts. You can't do it by sitting on the side of the road watching the cars go by."

CHP officers may bring in state and federal drug enforcement agencies once they find a load of drugs. If a suspect agrees to cooperate, federal officials may assume authority over the case so that those who take delivery of the drugs in other states can be put under surveillance and arrested.

Quick Facts About Drugs Seized by CHP

CHP HIGHWAY DRUG SEIZURE TOTALS

1996

Cocaine	3,184 lbs.
Heroin	103 lbs.
Marijuana	20,193 lbs.
Methamphetamine	350 lbs.

1997

Cocaine	1,241 lbs.
Heroin	127 lbs.
Marijuana	27,471 lbs.
Methamphetamine	1,911 lbs.

1998

Cocaine	2,312 lbs.
Heroin	90 lbs.
Marijuana	31,440 lbs.
Methamphetamine	2,064 lbs.

The strength of the CHP's efforts is that officers operate under traffic enforcement policy and case law which allows stops only when there is reasonable cause to believe a traffic violation has occurred.

The CHP stops a motorist for a traffic violation, then screens for indicators of criminal drug trafficking. They are the same behaviors any alert officer would check out for other crimes - passengers and driver who give different destinations, a driver claiming to be traveling across country has no luggage or a license and registration check reveals discrepancies.

Traffic stops yield plenty to keep officers busy, even though the incident may not be drug related. Southern California officers who stopped two women for a traffic violation found fraudulent travelers checks in their possession and broke up a ring involved in a multi-million dollar scam.



CAININE BARRY chews on a bony treat after he alerted on 176 pounds of marijuana being transported in cardboard boxes in the trunk of a 1989 Chevy Corsica. The officer stopped the car after he observed it following another too closely on I-10 in the San Bernardino area.



“Successful officers are a little more curious. Ask a few more questions. There’s nothing complicated about it,” said Bamrick of the Investigative Services Section. “Operation Pipeline training makes them even more effective.”



▲ A MARCH 1998 Border Division stop yielded 100 pounds of marijuana which had been concealed in the engine compartment.

A 1986 BUICK CENTURY westbound on I-10 was detained by an Inland Division officer for dark-tinted windows. A search revealed four hidden bundles of currency valued at \$20,000. ►



▲ OFFICERS in Border Division discovered 100 pounds of marijuana under the floor of a sports utility vehicle in February 1998.

